

BEYOND THE SHADOWS

A Sermon by Domenic Marbaniang
Pentecostal Church, Itarsi. January 13, 2008

‘...new moon, or the sabbath days. Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ’ (Col. 2: 16, 17).

The pale light from the silvery moon cast dark figures on the ground. Frightened, the little boy asked, ‘What’s it, mother?’ ‘It’s the spirit’ she replied.

The shadow was a frightening phenomenon to many a pre-literate man. Even in a seemingly sophisticated society as the Indian one, there was a time when caste Hindus considered the very shadow of an outcaste as defiling. Somehow a connection was imagined between the dark figure and solid reality. The modern world, however, seems to have been greatly emancipated from the myth of the shadow. Modern dictionaries define ‘shadow’ as a dark shape projected by any body blocking out light. In itself, the shadow has no existence. It owes its existence to light and a body on which the light falls. The shadow, of course, is only relatively real, i.e., in relation to the body. Candidly, the shadow is equal to darkness, in one way. When night comes, we say that darkness has descended: we don’t say the shadow of the earth is now on us. It’s only because we are able to see the dark figure in contrast to its radiant surrounding that we call it a shadow. Where such contrast is not possible, as in a dark room, we accept that we’re in some dark place. We don’t say, for instance, in the dark room case, that we’re in the shadow of the room’s four walls. We simply say, we’re in a dark room. The only difference between pure darkness and shadowy darkness, however, is that the shadow implies the existence of both light and a body while pure darkness implies none.

When the Bible declares the Old Testament rituals as shadows of the reality, which is Christ, it also implies the existence of both the light and the body: the light is the revelation of Biblical prophecy about Christ (the Holy Scriptures); the body is Christ Himself, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (cf. 1 Pet. 1: 10, 11, 20). Christ was not absent from Old Testament history; He was with them all the time (1 Cor. 10:4, 9; Heb. 11: 24-26). All the Old Testament stipulations found their fulfillment and reality in the being of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and the Son of the Living God. Therefore, Christ could boldly state that the Scriptures testified about Him (Jn. 5: 39). The revelation of Jesus Christ in New Testament history has emancipated the world from the shadowy philosophies of humanity. This emancipation, however, can only be experienced by an encounter with divine truth by solid faith (Jn. 8: 32). This encounter involves an intellectual, affectionate, and

volitional response to God's revelation of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Bible calls man to abandon his life of obsession with shadowy reality and enter into the reality of God's light.

There are two gigantic shadows of human origin that one can still behold in the world today: the shadow of human religion and the shadow of human effort. Both of these seek salvation of some kind but can only find solace in the reality of Jesus Christ.

The Shadow of Human Religion

Religion in itself should not be considered to be evil. Someone has defined it as man's attempt to reach God. Obviously, desiring God is not evil in itself. Paul was not incriminatory of the religious spirit of the Athenians (Acts 17: 22-30). To be religiously minded after the things of God is not a problem. The problem relates to the kind of God and religion that one desires and invents accordingly. The Bible is against any human religion that corrupts the divine image and relegates it to the level of corruptible creatures. This is the great wickedness of changing 'the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things' (Rom. 1: 23). It is an insult of God's glory. God doesn't denounce people of all religions. The Bible does speak of prophets and priests of God in non-Jewish religious traditions. Melchizedek, Balaam, and Epimenides were not all Jewish prophets; however, God used them to reveal His truth to people. One must understand that religion has both a positive and a negative aspect. The positive aspect of religion is that it often foreshadows Christ as the Saviour from evil. The various symbols and sacrifices can contain some revelatory information, and missionaries in the past have found some of them to be important conceptual links in communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. Don Richardson's book *Eternity in their Hearts* gives good examples of such positive aspects of religion. However, this should not serve to overlook the negative aspects of it: carnality, pride, self-spirituality, occultic involvement, demonic doctrines, superstitions, and evil rituals. The Bible makes a specific call to repent from all such humanly devised and demonically influenced appearances of religiosity (Acts 17: 30).

Human religion is shadowy, for it has no power in itself for salvation. Its wisdom is earth-bound and its power transient. But Christ is the eternal power and the eternal wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1: 24). Therefore, He is able to save those to the uttermost that come to Him (Heb. 7: 25). Religion is a shadow; Christ is the Reality. Religion is anticipation; the Gospel, the answer.

Dr. John T. Seamond, in his *The Supreme Task of the Church*, if I am right, puts this comparison quite strikingly:

Religion is man-made; the Gospel is God-given.

Religion is man's search for God; the Gospel is God's search for man.

Religion is good views, the Gospel is Good News.

Religion is good advice; the Gospel is a glorious announcement....

Religion white washes; the Gospel washes white.

Religion places the prime emphasis upon doing; the Gospel places the emphasis on a person.

You can take Buddha out of Buddhism and Buddhism still remains with its Four Noble Truths and its Eight-fold Path.

You can take Mohammed out of Islam and Islam is still intact with its Five Pillars of Action and its Six Articles of Belief.

But if you take Christ out of the Gospel, there is nothing left, for the Gospel is Christ.

Christ is the body; everything else is dependent on Him for meaning. All religious philosophies and practices are nullified without Christ. That is why Paul said that he considered all things that were profitable in the world's eyes as loss for Christ. In fact, he continued, he counted all the glories of carnal religion as refuse and dirt (Phil. 3: 4-8). We no longer need to strive after salvation and God; Jesus has appeared as the answer to all human problems. Let us publish the Good News.

The Shadow of Human Effort

In the mind's eye, one can see the soaring figure of Babel's tower, the combined effort of humanity, the symbol of man's consummate energy; now, all in the dust. Jewish historians tell us that the tower of Babel was man's affront against God, the symbol of human pride. Far glorious and magnificent than the Great Pyramids, any man could feel puny, little, and moth-like in comparison to it. The sky-scaling accomplishments of man are awe-inspiring, yet not without some intimidation. God destroyed the tower of Babel because united human affront could mean total destruction of all humanity. The division of man along linguistic barriers saved the world from unrestricted propagation of sin and allowed each ethnic group to seek God separately (Acts 17: 26, 27). However, such barriers do not significantly count in the modern age of information explosion. The barriers of language are being broken with machines doing much of the work across boundaries. Man is becoming, seemingly, more invincible and unconquerable. An edifice, greater than Babel's tower, is on its way. It is the image of man against all reality as man keeps pushing himself more and more to the center of all values. Mobile gadgets, silicon chips, and uncensored media; skyscraping towers, breath-taking architecture, and incredible edifices; amusement parks, clandestine parties, and bar clubs; multi-millionaire enterprises, soaring salaries, and easy money; medical wonders, newer therapies, and Yoga techniques (now believed as able to defeat everything...perhaps even God!); all of this mixed with

more psycho-traumas, broken families, fall of values, and ubiquitous corruption. All human striving without devotion to God, said Solomon, is a wild chasing after the wind, ultimately winding up in the grave (Eccl. 1: 14; 12: 13, 14, NIV).

Death, said Solomon, comes to all men and beasts alike (Eccl. 2: 16; 3: 20). Neither beauty nor might is eternal. All fade like the withering grass. When the feet of death draw near one's door, then neither beauty nor strength can plead or prevail. When the mourning bells of death ring and the funeral house is filled with cries, when mourners go about the street and a dirge surrounds the corpse, then will it be said: 'dust is man and to dust he has returned.' All works and glories, now nailed to the coffin, are interred in the grave.

The great philosopher and emperor of Rome, Caesar Marcus Aurelius, it is said, was in his old age murdered by his own son. If that was true then such death was unfortunate for such a great man. But death doesn't portend its time, style, and appearance. Alexander the Great, who conquered kingdoms and held nations in absolute control, was smitten to death by a malarial parasite, an insignificant mosquito.

Therefore, says one poet:

Why should the spirit of mortal be proud?
Like a swift-fleeting meteor, a fast-flying cloud,
A flash of the lightning, a break of the wave,
He passes from life to his rest in the grave.

'Tis the wink of an eye, 'tis the draught of a breath,
From the bosom of health to the paleness of death,
From the gilded saloon to the bier and the shroud.
Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud?

The absolute helplessness of man before the looming power of death fills him with anxiety. The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, said that it is the thought of death that drives man to thinking about reality. He saw all human indulgence in pleasure and daily activities as attempts to forget the reality of death. Contrary to what Shakespeare said, it is the tooth-ache experience, the reality of pain that makes one a philosopher. It was the reality of suffering that compelled Siddhartha Gautama to leave his comfortable palace and seek the meaning of life and the way of liberation. To him, emancipation comes only when the illusive soul successfully dismantles at death, never to be reborn again. But this looks confusedly at reality. It treats the soul as an enemy and considers death as the savior, the liberator. The Bible, however, makes it very clear that it is neither body nor soul but death that is man's greatest enemy and that it rules over man by the power of sin. But the good news is that Christ has appeared in human history as the salvation of God. By taking on human nature

and going through the death of the cross and rising up from the grave, He has dealt a death blow to death itself. Now those who come to Him can boldly announce that physical death doesn't mean their death but the death of death itself. Physical death is only a reality to those who are outside the reality of Jesus Christ. To those who are in Christ, death is itself become a shadow; we are freed from the fear of death.

'One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more: death, thou shalt die.'

Jesus Christ infuses life with eternal worth and meaning. All creation was made by Him and for Him (Col. 1: 16), and without Him all creative activity is void of real significance. But anyone who works and lives by faith in the Son of God brings fruit that endures forever, for he draws sap and energy from the True Vine (Jn. 15), and whatever he does shall prosper (Ps. 1: 3).

The Reality of Jesus Christ

Christ is the Truth of God. Faith on Him alone brings salvation home. Today we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5: 7). We believe and rejoice in the Lord though we do not see Him (1 Pet. 1: 8). But there will come a day when our present faith will be rewarded, for faith does have a reward (1 Pet 1: 7, 9). This will be when Christ our life appears in glory, at the end of the age, for judgment and salvation. The roof of the sky will rend open for the return of the King; the bright Sun of Glory will shine and all shadows will flee. We will stand and behold the glory of God in the very face of Jesus Christ. The candle light revelation that we now have (2 Pet. 1: 19) will give place to the perfect one. We will see Him as He is (1 Jn. 3: 2). Then will the works of each man be judged, whether they be gold or hay; and 'if any man's work abide..., he shall receive a reward' (1 Cor. 3:14). Our toils will be rewarded (Gal. 6: 9). 'Just one glimpse of Him in glory will the toils of life repay.' Then will the world know that the narrow way of the cross is far richer and glorious than the broad way of pleasure. Therefore, along with Paul, one should be bold to say that it is the cross of Jesus Christ and not the array of human endeavors that is really praise-worthy and glorious. The cross of Jesus Christ reduces the tower of Babel into a minuscule nothing. For all that man does is dust and ashes: dust he is and dust is all he can do. But what Jesus has done on the cross is eternal. His work of redemption is everlasting (Heb. 9: 12). His work goes beyond the shadows, for He is the Reality, the source of eternal life, the ground of all truth. He is the Light of the world and he that follows Him shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. He is coming back. In fact, He's as close as at the door. When the curtains shall be drawn on this age and the veil lifted from the face of eternity, then will there remain no room for remorse and regrets. The present 'now', therefore, is incomparably precious. It is the moment to break off with sin and embrace life. It is the moment to renounce the morbid arms of darkness for the

refreshing reality of light. It is the moment when the chains of falsehood can be broken with the sword of divine revelation. Let us, therefore, forsake the shadows and cling to the reality that is Christ. 'In Him we live, and move and have our being' (Acts 17: 28). 'Without Me ye can do nothing' (Jn. 15: 5). Amen!

Published in the *Light of Life*, Mumbai, 2008.